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***News Release***

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**Four men caught red-handed with 1.2 million illegal cigarettes**

Four men who were caught red-handed with more than 1.2 million illegal cigarettes in Stoke-on-Trent have been handed prison sentences totalling two-and-a-half years.

Mark Taylor, 50, from Scotland and Altaf Umarji, 47, from Leicester, were caught by HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) investigators in January 2014 with nearly 900,000 illegal cigarettes at a Little Chef car park, near Talke.

Paul Taft, 42, from Stoke, and Surinder Heer, 44, from Walsall, had been loading boxes into a VW van at a nearby pallet company. Both men tried to run from the scene, but were stopped and arrested. Officers discovered 215,400 cigarettes inside the vehicle and a further 88,200 non-duty paid cigarettes in a container.

Taylor and Umarji had driven in convoy to the restaurant car park after first meeting in a lay-by on the A500. Taylor was challenged and arrested by HMRC officers who found the cigarettes.

Umarji escaped from the scene, but was pursued by police officers who discovered £5,000 in Scottish bank notes inside the car. He was also caught on camera throwing cigarettes from the van he was driving.

Angela McCalmon, Assistant Director, Fraud Investigation Service, HMRC, said:

“These four were involved in theft from the taxpayer on a massive scale. People involved in the supply and sale of illegal cigarettes are depriving public services of vital funding and undermining legitimate traders.

“The £600,000 of lost public money in this case is the equivalent starting salary of 25 police officers. This crime affects us all and I would ask anyone with information about people who may be involved to report it to HMRC online or call our Fraud Hotline on 0800 788 887.”

All four men have been convicted of excise duty evasion and Umarji was also convicted of dangerous driving and handed a nine-month suspended prison sentence in June 2014.

Umarji pleaded guilty to fraudulent evasion of excise duty following his arrest. Taylor, Taft and Heer pleaded guilty to the same offence on the opening day of their trial on 10 December, 2018.

The men were sentenced to total of 30 months prison at Stoke-on-Trent Crown Court yesterday (10 January). The 1.2 million 777 branded cigarettes, worth more than £600,000 in unpaid duty, have been seized and destroyed.

**Notes for editors**

1. Mark Taylor DOB (19/04/1968) of Den Street, Buckhaven, Fife, KY8, pleaded guilty to the fraudulent evasion of excise duty of cigarettes, contrary to section 170 of the Customs and Excise Management Act (1979). He was sentenced to nine months prison, suspended for 18 months, at Stoke Crown Court on 10 January, 2019. He was also ordered to complete 180 hours of unpaid work.
2. Altaf Umarji DOB (14/09/1971) of Gwendolen Road, Leicester, LE5, pleaded guilty to the fraudulent evasion of excise duty of cigarettes, contrary to section 170 of the Customs and Excise Management Act (1979). He was sentenced to eight months prison at Stoke Crown Court on 10 January, 2019.
3. Paul Taft DOB (21/02/1976) of Castlefield Street, Stoke, ST4, pleaded guilty to the fraudulent evasion of excise duty of cigarettes, contrary to section 170 of the Customs and Excise Management Act (1979). He was sentenced to 27 weeks prison, suspended for 18 months, at Stoke Crown Court on 10 January, 2019. He was also ordered to complete 100 hours of unpaid work.
4. Surrinder Heer DOB (31/03/1974) of Willenhall Road, Willenhall, Walsall, WV13, pleaded guilty to the fraudulent evasion of excise duty of cigarettes, contrary to section 170 of the Customs and Excise Management Act (1979). He was sentenced to 27 weeks prison.
5. Source for starting salary of police officers taken from West Midlands Police (£23,124) <https://wmp.referrals.selectminds.com/default1180_draft/page/police-officer-responsibilities-pay-and-training-28>
6. Tax fraud can be reported to HMRC online at [www.hmrc.gov.uk/reportingfraud/online](http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/reportingfraud/online)

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